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A Prison Audience: Women Prisoners, Shakespeare and Spectatorship

Matthew Reason

This paper uses qualitative audience research to explore spectators' responses to the Donmar Warehouse's 2016 version of *The Tempest*. Its focus is on a very specific audience, consisting of women prisoners who watched the production when it was staged in the prison gym of HMP New Hall, Wakefield, UK. With the production incorporating an all-female cast, and the play relocated to a women's prison, this audience was particularly implicated; watching a version of themselves on stage, filtered and projected through the lens and language of Shakespearian drama. This paper explores the impact and nature of this experience, examining the prison audience's emotional, empathetic and experiential responses to watching *The Tempest*.

Using a participatory research methodology – outlined further below – this paper examines four key elements of the production that emerged as significant to the spectators themselves. From these an overlapping set of critical concepts emerge that allow us to understand the emotional and affective impact of the performance. Specifically, the paper draws out themes of: 1) *identification*, where the spectators found personal resonance with the characters and experiences presented to them on stage; 2) various forms of emotional, empathetic and psychical *distance*, which produced a detached kind of self-knowing; 3) *beauty*, which provided the production with an impactful, aesthetic power. First, however, the paper will examine the nature of the production and its context within traditions of theatre (and specifically Shakespeare) in prisons.

Context: Shakespeare in Prisons

There is a rich and varied tradition of Shakespeare in prisons, which Amy Scott-Douglass describes as having long historical routes but accelerating in volume and attention in the 1980s and 1990s (2011: 4). Two of the most prominent examples being the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Shakespeare Comes to Broadmoor* in the UK (Cox, 1992) and the Shakespeare Behind Bars project lead by Curt Tofteland in the USA (2011).

Research and discussion in this area has primarily focused on prisoners as performers and theatre makers in participatory projects (for example Pensalfini, 2015; Scott-Douglass, 2011; Shailor, 2011; Thompson, 2008), considering impacts on reoffending, personal development and wellbeing. Laura Bates, for example, focuses of the uses of Shakespeare in criminal rehabilitation in terms of "personal, educational and social outcomes" (2003, p. 151). Other work has considered the relationship between prison theatre and the representation and identity of prisoners in society (Walsh 2008). Whilst in dialogue with such research, this paper has a different focus, examining prisoners as spectators rather than participants, watching a production which was at once both Shakespearian and a representation of the prison environment.

The Donmar's production was conceived and directed by Phyllida Lloyd as part of a trilogy of plays – *Julius Caesar* (2012), *Henry V* (2014) and finally, the focus of this paper, *The Tempest* (2016). Each of the productions was staged with the same all-female cast and each was re-located to the setting of a women's prison. One of Lloyd's initial motivations for the trilogy was to redress the lack of strong female roles in theatre, and in Shakespeare in particular. Lloyd describes the decision to locate the first production (*Julius Caesar*) in a prison as something that "in the beginning was a strategy and a device", responding to the desire to find a setting in which the play's preoccupations of freedom and justice, and its portrayal of extreme violence for those ends, would be believable for both the audience and the actors. The strategy soon became, in Lloyd's words, "something much deeper", as through further research the cast and production team began to realise the layers of

resonance between the heightened environments of Shakespearean tragedy and the heightened environment of prison. Lloyd recalls, for example, taking the text of *Julius Caesar* into HMP Royal Holloway, London, and talking about it with women prisoners who found the play, in her words, "highly suitable for their preoccupations" (Lloyd, 2018).

In finding this resonance, Lloyd echoes with a recurring articulation in discussions of theatre in prisons of Shakespeare's ability not only to speak *to* the prison context, but indeed speak *of* and *for* the lived experience of prisoners. Curt Tofteland, for example, describes one of the goals of the Shakespeare Behind Bars project as encouraging participants to "Relate Shakespeare's universal human themes to themselves" (2011, p. 219). While, in asserting Shakespearian "universality", Bates concludes that "at least some of the plays are even *more* relevant to this group than to other" (2003, p. 162). Scott-Douglass similarly concludes that, "Shakespeare is a creative, social and spiritual life force; a vital and necessary reminder that, no matter what, we are all human beings" (2011, p. 129). Such discourses are clearly open to critique, and Peter Holland's more nuanced statement that "Shakespeare is not universal – always and everywhere the same – but is everywhere different and that is why we keep going to it" (cited in Balfour 2018, p. 210) is particularly useful. As Ramona Wray notes, there is also a need to engage with "the precise meanings that Shakespeare has for prisoners" (2011, p. 343). It is precisely such an examination of how the prison audience engaged with *The Tempest* that is the focus of this paper.

Throughout the development of their Shakespeare Trilogy, the Donmar undertook research and development that embedded the creative process within the female prison estate. With *The Tempest* this took the form of an extensive collaboration with York St John University's Prison Partnership Project (PPP), under the leadership of Rachel Conlon. The PPP operates a weekly theatre practice within prisons and was approached by Lloyd in order to seek opportunities to gain a sustained relationship with women prisoners and enable deeper understanding of the terrain of the women's prison. Together they developed a process whereby the women participating in the PPP's

drama group in prison studied and rehearsed *The Tempest* in parallel to the London production, with regular live audio link ups between the prison and the Donmar where each could listen in and feedback on the development of the other's process. Other connections included prisoners working to develop props for the production, including a series of clothing and hair pieces constructed out of tampons, prison bin bags and other materials that would be to hand within the prison environment.

For Conlon the process was

> underpinned by the development of a non-hierarchical approach to art making, whereby it was not the professional artists that held all the knowledge, with the women prisoners recognised as experts in terms of their own lived experience and the nature of the world in question. (Conlon 2018, personal interview)

By drawing on the insider knowledge of the women prisoners, the Donmar was able to build a detailed, rich and authentic understanding of the dynamics, pressures and personalities at play in the world they were representing.

By its nature, the prison environment is one that exists alongside but separate to the general population. It is at once known – with prison a recurring feature of popular representations from *Porridge* to *Cool Hand Luke*; *Prisoner Cell Block* H to *Orange is the New Black* – and yet an environment of which only a tiny minority have any first-hand experience. Except for prisoners, those working in the criminal justice system, friends or family, most members of the wider population never visit and rarely think about the prisons and the prison communities that are close to us geographically but form an isolated world apart. The particularity of the prison world is demarked most explicitly by the physical environment, which itself determines routines of movement as doors are locked and unlocked, and that limits literal horizons and lines or sight. I remember vividly one woman describing to me how the thing she missed most while in prison was the ability to see a view or horizon of any sort. The prison also marks itself on its community through

highly specific and developed linguistic vocabularies and the internalising of both explicit and tacit institutional norms and expectations. The manner by which the physical environment and regime of prison determines both interpersonal relations with others, and individuals' relationship with their own bodies, was famously theorised by Michel Foucault in terms of producing 'docile bodies' (1979). Since then writers such as Aylwyn Walsh have critiqued this inscription of a lack of agency, examining how prison theatre offers spaces which give prisoners a means of "asserting agency in terms they define for themselves" (2014, p. 40).

The extensive and careful research and development processes of the Donmar Warehouse were partly motivated by a desire to convincingly and authentically represent this world that is very enclosed and set apart from everyday life. Through the process of exploration with the Prison Partnership Project this shifted, recognising the deeper psychical connections between the Shakespearian plays and the lived experiences of the women in prison. It is worth noting that by time *The Tempest* came into production, the Donmar had invested five years of engagement with women in prisons and all this learning informed the final production in the trilogy. It also motivated a desire to complete the circle of engagement: to not only take from the prison community but also to give back. This was manifested in the investment of time with the women participating in the PPP's drama groups, and the conscious development of a cast that included women post-release (facilitated via Clean Break, a UK theatre company offering training and performing opportunities to women with experience of the criminal justice system). Finally, and the focus of this paper, it included the logistically complex and politically charged decision to return the professional production to the prison and stage it to a prison audience. This took place at HMP New Hall, a closed category women's prison, in early 2017.

Research Methods

The methodological approach adopted for this research was located within traditions of qualitative audience research, specifically in terms of undertaking a participatory enquiry into the phenomenological experience of watching theatre. Creswell describes the participatory worldview as one that sees meaning as "constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (2009, p. 9). In this manner, this research was interested in the meanings and values that the participants' placed on their own subjective experiences.

Qualitative audience research typically sets out to engage participants in wide-ranging, reflective conversation about their experiences (Barker, 1998). This is often designed to mimic real-world situations, with the focus group format having much in common with the post-show conversations that form the natural aftermath of a social visit to the theatre with a group of friends (Sauter 2000). Indeed, regardless of the strikingly unnatural context of the prison, the post-performance focus groups that this research undertook were very much like many others, designed to encourage audience members to speak openly, reflectively and in detail about their recent experience of watching theatre.

The particular circumstances, however, did have some specific impacts on the methods, with one being that prison security requirements dictated that no audio recordings of the discussions would be permitted. In previous audience research I have been interested in how structured exercises and tasks – ranging from drawing through to creative writing to pen and paper exercises – can facilitate discussion by giving participants space and time in which to think and reflect (for example Reason, 2018). In this particular context there was an additional advantage, as pen and paper exercises have a degree of self-recording, producing documents that can be retained after the focus group itself.

From this combination of methodological and pragmatic parameters a focus group structure was devised and conducted across three post-performance workshops, comprising a total of 18

participants (11 from the general prison population, 7 from the PPP's drama groups). Each followed the same structure:

1. Initial Memories. Participants were invited to write memories of the performance on large sheets of paper under four broad headings: something you remember, something you heard, something you saw, something you thought.
2. Discussion. Through facilitated discussion, participants were invited to group and reflect upon the initial memories.
3. Extended memories. Participants were invited to identify one memory that they had talked about and which was most important or significant to them. They were asked to write this memory in the centre of a blank spider diagram, and then expand upon it in the surrounding circles to construct a Memory Map (figure 1 illustrates this process diagrammatically).

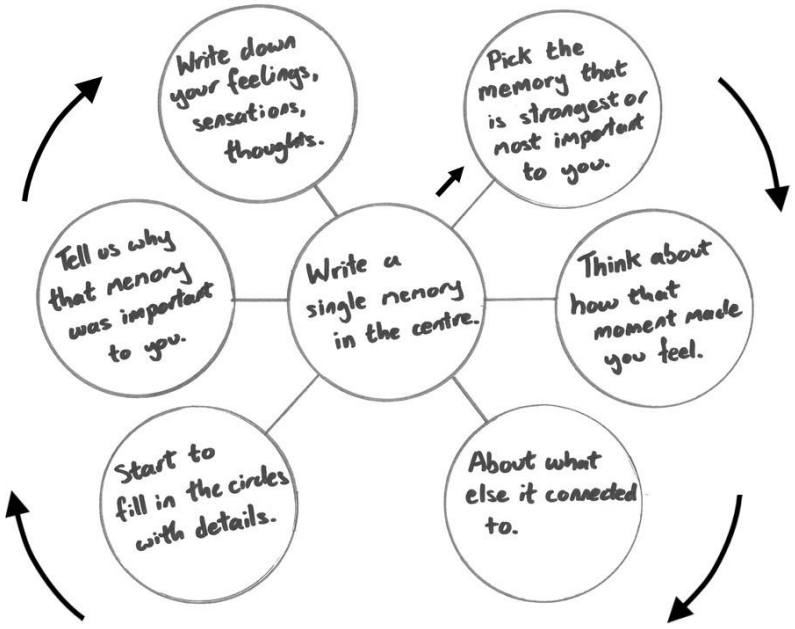

Figure 1. Visualisation of the Memory Map process.

These Memory Maps represent the culmination of the research process, crystallising and communicating the participants' self-reflective understanding and insight into their own lived experiences. As such they also form the central component of the subsequent analysis.

The structured nature of the focus groups lent itself to the grouping of responses, including thematically and by the character, scene or element of the production that was being described. A participant-led analysis therefore examines the four elements that were most frequently included as the central point in the Memory Maps:

1. The opening scene (3 occurrences).
2. The portrayal and character of Caliban (2 occurrences)
3. The portrayal and character of Prospero (5 occurrences).
4. The use of song and music (8 occurrences).

The following discussion examines each of these four elements, using as the starting point the words and responses of the women who formed the prison audience. At the same time, I will begin the work of conceptual analysis, tracing how the experience of the production kept in constant interplay both identification ("that's me") and a reflective, thoughtful, considered distance ("that's not me"). Finally, the theme of beauty will emerge in the discussion of the impact of song and music on the experience of *The Tempest.*

1. The Opening

Dramaturgically the opening scenes of *The Tempest* had a particular job to do, establishing the setting and world of the prison in which the production would take place. This was done through a small number of pieces of furniture, including institutional looking chairs, a table and a metal prison-style bed. Possibly more important, however, and strongly recalled by the women, was the sonic environment: "the banging on railings", "the siren going off", "the shouting through the windows"

and “the tinny atmosphere”. The sonic design sought to create a sense of place, of threat and confinement, of being locked in and surrounded by metal doors and metal bars. It evoked the physical environment of the prison. One woman wrote that it reminded her of when she first came to prison and the feelings of “crying, scary, angry”. See figure 2.

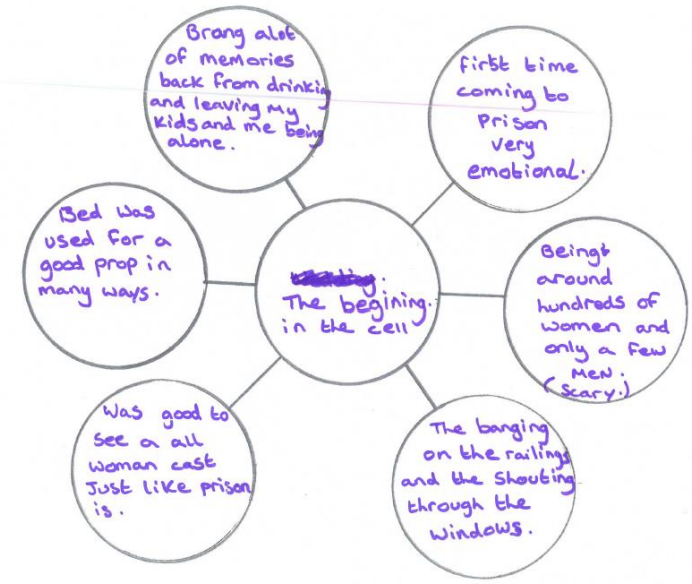

Figure 2. The beginning in the cell.

This moment, the opening of the production, resonated with these spectators as familiar, close enough to their own experience to see it as portraying something they recognised. It created a world with which they could identify.

“Identification” in theatre can be thought of as describing relationships of empathy, of bringing the work and its emotions, its meanings, its world, closer and closer until the gap between audience/work and fiction/reality might be reduced to a hypothetical zero. There is a seductive quality to this idea of zero distance: a complete empathetic connection in which *we* place ourselves in *their* shoes, see ourselves in *their* circumstances, feel *their* pain, lose ourselves in *their* experience. Indeed, this potential and power of identification is the underpinning of much theatrical engagement. For the prison audience there was a powerful spark of identification in these opening

moments, and for several it catapulted them back to their own experiences: “first time coming to prison, very emotional” wrote one woman; “brang a lot of memories back” another.

If there is a seduction to such identification there is also an accompanying history of caution, even of distrust, asserting that over identification renders art as something other than art. This is in part our inheritance of a Kantian and Enlightenment understanding of art in which beauty and aesthetics are distinguished from other experiences (such as sensations and emotions) by disinterestedness. Anything else, motivated by personal connection, or sensual engagement, or practical utility, is not in the realm of the aesthetic. More broadly, “distance” describes attitudes of alienation, abstraction and criticality in which the work and its meanings and emotions are removed from the self to enable an aesthetic (or, in Brechtian context, political) engagement.

Perhaps the most influential laying-out of these relationships was made by Edward Bullough, his 1912 paper “’Psychical Distance’ as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle.” For Bullough “psychical distance” is what enables us to engage in an experience as an aesthetic object, rather than on purely personal terms. As an example, he contrasts the immediately personal experience of a fog at sea – marked by a sense of danger, anxiety and fear – with the aesthetic experience of fog at sea – which has characteristics of relish and enjoyment. The difference, for Bullough, being the function of distance.

Crucially for Bullough, while loss of distance is problematic – for we cease to engage with art as art and instead focus solely on our own condition – the ideal state is what he describes as “the *utmost decrease of distance without its disappearance*” (italics in original). Indeed, here Bullough constructs distance as a kind of scale, with two equally problematic extremes. “Under-distancing”, where the work is experienced as “crudely naturalistic” or simply “harrowing” in its realism and closeness; and the reverse “over-distancing”, where the work produces merely an “impression of improbability, artificiality, emptiness or absurdity”.

> Distance does not imply an impersonal, purely intellectually interested relation of such a kind. On the contrary, it describes a personal relation, often highly emotionally coloured, but of a peculiar character. It peculiarity lies in that the personal character of the relation has been, so to speak, filtered. It has been cleared of the practical, concrete nature of its appeal, without, however, thereby losing its original constitution. (Bullough, 1912, Section #15)

Two things are worth noting in this instance. First, is that staged within a real prison gym, competing with real prison alarms that periodically interrupted the performance, watched by real prisoners wearing real prison uniforms, the production by default could never succeed in reducing representational distance to zero. It would always fail, there would always be gaps between it and the world in which it sat. Second, the women prison audience was aware of this, they weren't uncritical and naïve in their reading of the production. They noted that the play prison alarm did not sound like their prison alarm (it was an "American jail sound" one suggested) while another felt that "all the banging when they were in prison – it don't happen".

With *The Tempest*, spectators' emotional identification with the production ultimately resided in the performances of the actors themselves. This included: their physical appearance, "it was good to see a all woman cast, just like prison is"; the fact that in their diversity of age, ethnicity and appearance "they" looked not unlike "us"; and an awareness of the processes of investment, effort and respect that were manifest within the production. As one participant noted, "it was nice to know that professional actors think about real lives in prison."

The opening sequences of the production earnt the engagement of the prison audience, communicating a sense of having got the atmosphere and feel of the prison "right". The women felt that their world had been captured, understood and reflected back to them with honesty, knowledge and sympathy. This also put the spectators in mind of their own lived experiences, inviting them to invest themselves into the events of the production and the emotional lives of the characters on the stage. Such identification was not absolute, however, there was a critical distance

and detachment, an awareness of the limits of authenticity, awareness of the fabric and workings of the production.

2. Caliban

Caliban is often central to contemporary readings of *The Tempest*, particularly from a post-colonial perspective that read the character as a parallel for colonialization (such as Aimé Césaire's 1969 adaptation *Une Tempête*). The indigenous inhabitant of the island ("this island's mine, by Sycorax my mother"), Caliban is first conquered, then feared, subjugated and enslaved. The potential to read the prison experience onto Caliban is therefore already present, legible in his experience of trauma and marginalisation.

The prison community – particularly in the female prison estate – is one often characterized by different forms and experiences of trauma. A 2018 report by the Prison Reform Trust shows that more than half of women in prison have been victims of domestic violence, manifested in high levels of self-harm and mental illness. Other figures suggest that 53% of women prisoners have experienced trauma, with custodial sentences also often leading to subsequent traumatic loss of children. There is increasing emphasis on the need to recognise that women in prisons are often the "victims of their past experiences", with their custodial sentence a symptom of these experiences (Leese 2018: 19). Although not explicitly stressed within this production, given this context it is not surprising that the character of Caliban became a focal point for projections of the traumatized self and of a body in confinement.

A number of the women talked about the scenes involving Caliban, Stephanio and Trinculo. Within the production these were the scenes in which the most leeway was taken with Shakespearian language, the performers inserting jokes and dialogue directly referencing elements of the prison experience. These scenes were funny, underscored the production's knowledge of the

prison world, and had an immediacy to them. They provided elements of comedic relief, referencing familiar cultural tropes of drunken foolishness. For the prison audience there was also a sense of identification, and they responded with descriptions of their own experiences of alcohol misuse and, as one woman put it, "going for a piss [i.e. drug] test" (see figure 3).

Figure 3. Going for a piss test.

While the response here has a degree of self-knowing it is predominantly light, detached and comedic. In contrast, for a different woman, these same scenes resulted in an almost complete and absolute loss of distance. Recalling the scene this woman also recalled her own experiences of alcoholism, and the subsequent loss of her family and children. As she talked she started to cry, all the context of the production for a moment forgotten as it became exclusively about her own experience. In Bullough's terms this could be described as "under-distancing": the production – or, more specifically, post-performance talk about the production – rendered meaningful and present only in terms of her own personal feelings.

While the production, and its subsequent staging within the prison, did not have a therapeutic goal it is striking that Bullough's aesthetic concepts of distance and identification map

onto articulations of the function and impact of theatre within dramatherapy and playback. In *Drama as Therapy*, for example, Phil Jones writes that while "often empathy and distance are presented as oppositional forces […] it is more profitable to see both as part of any reaction we have to a dramatic phenomenon, whether in theatre or a therapy group" (2007, p. 100). In fact it is the tension and movement between the two that creates the dynamic for change within the therapeutic context. While empathy creates the energy, the connection, the force, distancing is essential and healthy. "Distancing," writes Jones, "encourages an involvement which is more orientated towards thought, reflection and perspective" (2007, p. 95).

The purpose here is not to argue any therapeutic readings or impacts of the performance, but rather to argue that it was across and between identification and distance that the prison audiences' responses to *The Tempest* resided.

3. **Prospero**

The character of Prospero is naturally the central focus of *The Tempest* and the Donmar production layered his emotional trajectory onto the world of the prison, finding resonances in themes of banishment, punishment, isolation, loss of status and – eventually – forgiveness. Forgiveness of others; and, equally importantly, forgiveness of himself. For the prison audience the emotional state and experiences of Prospero projected onto elements of their own hopes and experiences.

For this audience, the nature of Prospero's punishment – with Prospero's cell and the island mapped against the prison cell and prison environment – was perceived directly and clearly. One woman described the character in these terms: "I paid particular attention to Prospero – lost all his standing – [from] the Duke of Milan to rotting on the island." The two scenes involving Prospero that were talked about most often, however, concerned themes of forgiveness. The first of these was the wedding scene between Miranda and Ferdinand, which for many of the participants formed the

emotional heart of the production, resonating with parent-child relationships and feelings of leaving behind or losing or letting down their own children. For one woman the whole play could be read in terms of Prospero "as a parent who cares".

In the production this scene incorporated giant white floating balloons, onto which were projected images of hope, desire, and longing, before suddenly in a moment of anger Prospero pops each in turn. One woman recalled this moment as exploding the façade of control:

> Prospero bursting the balloons – sadness and anger – he comes clean – he's taken his front down – he's admitting that he has a heart – he hangs his mask up.

For another woman the balloons were described in terms of being a beautiful but fake image that needed to be destroyed in order to move on. There was a sense here of the need to face reality, particularly emotionally and in relation to family.

The narrative of forgiveness was also present in the second scene that was remembered and talked about frequently, which was the ending, where Miranda, Ferdinand and the others have left the island/prison, leaving Prospero and Caliban behind. For one woman this scene depicted the moment "when Prospero forgave his enemies and said goodbye to them". The Memory Map in figure 4 expands this moment to thoughts about moving from anger and old hurts, to peace, forgiveness and moving forward.

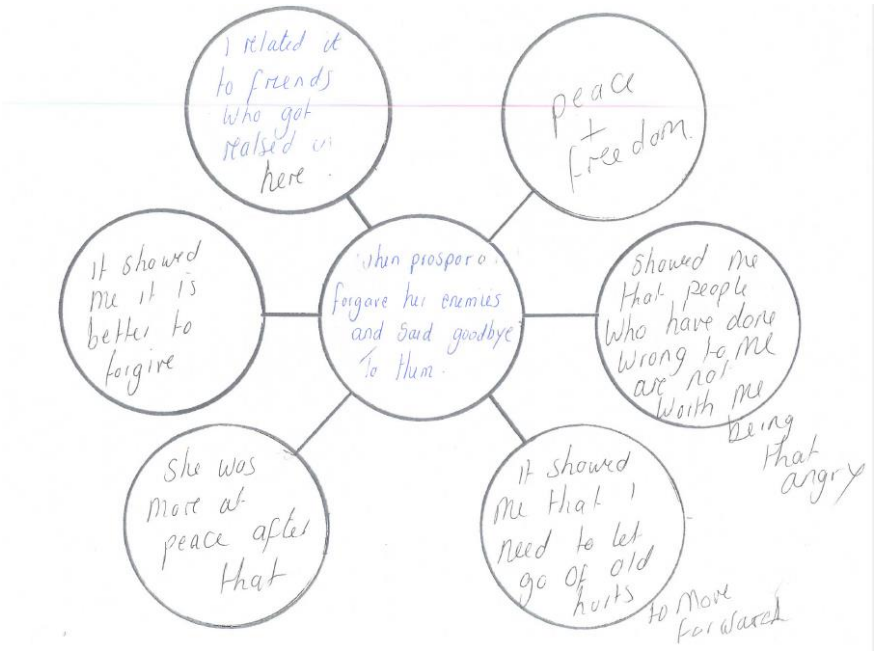

Figure 4. When Prospero forgave his enemies.

The sense of genuine friendships being made in prison, of reaching a kind of peace with oneself and the world, mapped closely to their experiences and sense of identity. For this spectator the scene reminded her of the value of forgiving in order to move on yourself: “it showed me that I need to let go of old hurts and move on.”

Another woman wrote “Prospero’s Loss of Standing” in the centre of her Memory Map. In the circles around this, fleshing out the thoughts, feelings and recollections connected to that central moment, she wrote: Outcast; Job Gone; Lifestyle Gone, Knowledge Gone, Life Gone, Friends Gone (see figure 5). This response, however, is only partly about Prospero’s status, banished to an island, stripped of his occupation, title and status; for it is also and equally about this woman’s own experience and the impact of being incarcerated on her socially, economically and on her sense of self and identity. Considering Prospero’s loss of standing, she reflected on her own; considering his status as an outcast she recognised her own inability to see a way back, a way of regaining a sense of value and respect in the eyes of society, of her family and of herself. The production spoke to her forcefully as somebody who had insider knowledge of being and feeling like an outcast. This

woman's experience of *The Tempest* was also shaped by her personal journey, from having first served her sentence in a closed prison she was now watching the production as a day release from an open women's prison. It was having made this progress towards rehabilitation – again like Prospero's own journey towards self-awareness – that she was able to observe the women in the close prison and comment:

> We're just a big rubbish heap of women in prison. We're a lot of wounded people. A lot of sad, shocking stories behind a lot of them.

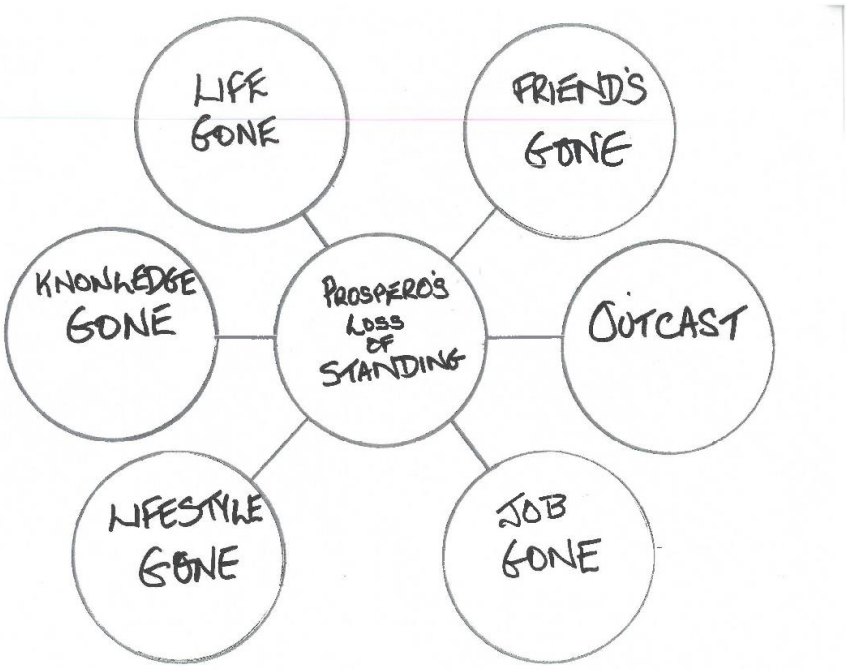

Figure 5. Prospero's loss of standing.

Writing about empathy and our relationship to art, philosopher Thomas Hilger proposes that an artwork invites a particular kind of engagement that "enables a person to reflect on, and possibly even transform, herself" (2017, p. 3). There is something of this – in a messy, grounded and emergent manner – in these responses to Prospero, which evidence simultaneously both a sense of self and of otherness. As Hilger continues:

> An artwork *asks* a person to engage with it in such a way that her sensuous, affective, and conceptual capacities enter a play-like state of interaction. This state affects a person in three related ways: it makes her temporarily lose her sense of herself, it makes her gain a sense of the other, and ultimately, it makes her achieve selfhood (2017, p. 3).

While the "transformation of selfhood" is an overly absolutist claim to make of any experience of a single artwork or performance, there was something of this journey towards self-awareness and self-witnessing in these responses to Prospero and *The Tempest.* This takes the form of a loss of self, the sense of other, and a return to a new kind of selfhood or self-knowing. As many of the women in the prison audience identified with the psychological and interpersonal conditions of the play, describing their own states of punishment and forgiveness, they were also utilising and borrowing the language and characters of Shakespeare as a vehicle to know their own experiences. As Pensalfini describes it in *Prison Shakespeare*, Shakespeare's capacity to articulate the complexities of life has particular impact when we are able to claim his words to "become our own" (2015, p. 2).

4. Song and Music

While all the elements described above were discussed by the prison audience, the single most talked about, impactful and memorable aspect of *The Tempest* for this audience was the vibrant music and dance that ran throughout the production. Particularly for the women who made up the general prison population (i.e. who had not participated in the drama workshops) it was this that was the focal element in their Memory Maps and indeed was in the centre of eight of the diagrams. For these women the music, the singing and dancing gave them something they could immediately connect to and produced feelings of elation and empowerment.

In an analysis that has focused on ideas of identification – that is the women seeing elements of themselves within the characters, scenarios and emotions of the production – the music

and singing might at first seem like a more explicitly escapist element, a moment of spectacle enjoyed as spectacle. It certainly was this, and importantly the sheer quality of the musical elements was appreciated – as one woman remarked, "it was great to see something so good in this dump" – and the importance of perceptions of *quality* will be returned to in a moment. The music also had an emotional, feel-good function (and this is the language used by the women themselves, it made them in their words "feel good"). The connection was more personal than this however, with the music reminding the women of their *own* potential for pleasure, their own experience of good times, of the world outside prison ("being on the out"), of carnival. For some it made them "think about when I was night clubbing"; for others there was a connection to family and friends.

For several of the women the experience of the music and dance not only made them want to join in ("It made me feel like I wanted to get up and join them"; "made me want to play some music") but also gave them the sense that they *could* do it ("It made me feel that even I could do anything"; "gave me the courage to feel I could do anything"). The experience of high-quality, vibrant music being made live in front of them had a clearly aspirational impact. It offered them a colourful, lively sense of possibilities and the opportunity to imagine themselves into such roles.

For an audience largely deprived of experiences of beauty, the pleasure gained from the music was uplifting and releasing. One woman wrote that: "the beat of the music from the bass made me miss the happiness music brings and the feeling as it vibrates through your body."

Figure 6. Music: Feel free as a bird!

If music therefore represented a way for the audience to access the performance, the accumulation of responses around ideas of liberation – "feel good, feel at ease", "you let go of bad feelings in yourself", "open up your feelings", "feel free as a bird" (figure 6) – asserts how its sheer joy and pleasure had a forcefulness that drove spectators towards other emotions and aspirations. Here Elaine Scarry's discussion on the power of beauty feels particular apposite, as she writes that moments of beauty act "like small tears in the surface of the world that pulls us through to some vaster space" (2006, p. 112). The explosion of beauty that the song and music provided within the drab, disregarded and unloved physical environment of the prison had exactly this impact on the women prisoners, drawing them through to a "vaster" space of – if only momentary – hope and optimism. Yes this was a kind of escapism (almost of a literal kind) but never has the vital importance of this been more in evidence.

For the inmates their daily surroundings and experiences are utterly functional, stripped largely of colour, often of poor quality and poorly maintained. There is a populist ethos, that prisoners do not deserve anything but the minimum, and certainly do not deserve objects,

experiences or environments of quality (in 2014, for example the UK Minister of Justice sought to limit prisoners' access to books and musical instruments – Cook 2014). The impact of this belief on the inmates is a sense of their own worthlessness, a kind of dehumanisation.

The Tempest, by contrast, was immediately seen and recognised as something of "quality" – that is something that was crafted with care, made by people with talent, and that was beautiful. It was, one woman remarked, "beautiful to look at"; another comments "I'm in awe of them all, of the performance, I feel like a kid watching *The Wizard of Oz*"; another simply complimented "a lot of talent, brilliant acting". The experience and sense of this quality was tangible, underpinning all of the responses to the performance. It affirmed their sense of worth, lifted their ambitions, helped them dream a little. The symbolic significance of this is worth stressing: the project involved restaging a high quality, high cost London production from a world-renowned theatre company in a closed prison environment, just prior to its transfer to New York theatreland.

This, to an extent, would have been the case whatever the content of the play. The impact of bringing something of quality into an environment and to a community that had been starved of such excellence was profound in its own right. The sense of quality was appreciated, absorbed and relished. The particular impact here, of course, was that this was a production that has focused its quality, its time, talent and attention upon them. Upon them both broadly, in that it was set in a women's prison, that it represented elements of their experiences; and upon them more specifically in that the Donmar had worked with some of the women either through the PPP and the rehearsal process or in the development of props that utilised prison materials and aesthetic and were made by the women prisoners themselves. As Rachel Conlon notes:

> When the plays came back to the prison the women were able to see elements of their own contribution, in props and costumes, in characters, in voices and stories, re-contextualised in the professional performance. (Conlon 2018, personal interview)

In writing about Shakespeare in prisons, commenters often discuss the significance of the canonical status of Shakespeare within our society. Pensalfini, for example, notes how both the "prestige" and perceived "difficulties" of Shakespeare add weight to projects that might not exist in other circumstances (2015, p. 226). Elizabeth Charlebois similarly notes the political impact of working with authoritative texts, writing, "Shakespeare is clear valuable cultural capital for a population that feels as though they possess little of such capital to begin with" (2011, p. 262). Within the context of the marginalised voices and communities of a women's prison there is therefore a particular power and impact in identifying and claiming their own story within that of Shakespearian theatre. This perception is captured by these remarks from one participant:

> You hit rock bottom when you go into prison – Shakespeare's for posh educated people – its really good for the prison community – it's like you have respect for us – to fit into society – to aspire.

Conclusion

The women prisoners watching *The Tempest* had a very particular and implicated relationship with the production. It was relocated to *their* context, staged by an all-female cast who looked, sounded and moved like *them*, it spoke back to them in a direct and immediate way. It reminded them of their first time coming to prison, of the emotions of leaving family and children behind, of their sense of punishment and isolation, their loss of status, and of the challenge of forgiveness. They saw themselves within the production, they were implicated in a manner that meant they could not look away or watch with indifference. As one woman wrote, speaking both of herself and her fellow spectators: "Sick girls – it captured the girls – they sat and watched – mind blowing – they were respectful of the play – they sat and listened."

At the same time the production was very much not of or about them. It was of Dukes and high intrigue. It was set on a magical island inhabited by monsters and fairies. It was spoken in Shakespearian language that was at a distinct remove from their own. And at times it broke out into beautiful, spectacular, celebratory song and dance.

Anna Harpin (2011) discusses how trauma produces a tension between the "impossibility of telling" (which would entail a return to the trauma) and the "impossible silence" (which would entail a neglect or erasure of the trauma). For the women in the prison audience It was into this space that *The Tempest* inserted itself – able to speak of and about and for them without being the thing itself. For many of the women prisoners watching *The Tempest* was at once a process of identification, they could see themselves reflected back on the stage, but also of distance: at once me and more than me. Combined with the performance's affective power and aesthetic beauty it became an articulate witness that spoke to and of their experience.

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